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PRIMITIVE MAN IN MODERN BELIEFS.¹

THE question 's oft been asked of me,
 "What sort of thing may Folk-Lore be?
 "What have the folk to do with lore?
 "Is it not left for those who pore
 "O'er stones and coins — old, musty screeds —
 "Annals of yore — forgotten deeds?"

Beliefs that ruled man long ago
 Within our actions oftentimes show;
 The habits of primeval days
 Still close beset our modern ways;
 And thoughts we scorn, with boastful pride,
 Our steps, unconscious, often guide.

For man is but a compound vast
 Of generations, centuries past,
 Who bears within himself the seed
 Of fears, ambitions, hate, and greed,
 That once o'er ancestors bore sway,
 Though hidden in his soul to-day.

When first the early morning broke
 Upon the primitive Aryan folk,
 When from the rising sun the beams
 Athwart the gray shot golden gleams,
 The orb blazed out in splendor dread:
 Men saw with awe-struck, bended head.

Obscure and dense, in dismal gloom,
 At the same time his home and tomb,
 On the hard rock his bed was made,
 On the rough ground his form was laid:
 In his dark cave no comfort lies,
 And forth to greet the day he flies.

No mantle clothed his manly form,
 Nor cloak nor furs his heart kept warm;
 A scanty girdle 'round his waist,
 To save decorum rudely placed,
 Was all he wore; his matted hair
 Was shaggy as the unkempt bear.

Now comes the tug, — what shall he eat?
 He 's fully ready for his meat,

¹ Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society held in Philadelphia, November 29, 1889.

But, supper over, none was left ;
Is he, then, of all hope bereft ?
Off runs he to the neighboring brook,
And finds his breakfast with a hook.

He speaks no word and sign makes none ;
From out his mouth a sullen moan,
Deep-drawn, makes known his feelings true, —
To grunt is all that he can do !
And, e'en he spake in accents clear,
There 's no one nigh his voice to hear.

From forest dense, from rugged lair,
Comes forth immense the great Cave Bear,
And hungry he ; his food to gain
He rushes savage o'er the plain.
Rocks fly, darts pierce, — smit by a stone,
Bruin falls dead with piteous groan.

But whilst the combat fierce endured,
The sky 's with sombre clouds obscured :
The lightnings blaze, the thunders crash,
The rain descends in watery plash :
Poor man is 'whelmed with deadly fear,
And prays that heaven once more be clear.

The day-god's course at last fulfilled,
With silence vast the earth is filled ;
Swift-gathering Night throws her black pall
O'er sea and sky, and man and all
That lives ; with terror in his breast
Lest dawn ne'er come again, he sinks to rest.

To rest ? Around that stalwart brow
Black night doth shadow forth, I trow,
Grim spectres, goblins, lemurs, elves,
Base simulacra of ourselves,
The baleful foes of waking themes
To haunt him ever in his dreams.

With frightened mien and bristling hair,
He bounds from off his cheerless lair,
And scans his den with questioning eye,
But finds no ghost is standing nigh.
He sighs relief ; the dream has fled,
And on the ground he lays his head.

So runs his life from day to day,
To checkered feelings easy prey ;
For fear and hope, and mute despair,
And cankered sorrows, grief, are there,

To waft forever 'round his head
Their flights of fancy, care, and dread.

' The rainbow shines, the ravens croak,
E'en fate is found in whirling smoke,
The circling swallows in the sky,
The crickets' song when eve is nigh : '—
Omens beset his daily walk,
And spectral visions nightly stalk.

Century on century now has sped, —
Have superstitions long since fled ?
Have we, then, thrown away all fears,
The harvest of decaying years,
And live exempt from portents dire
Of sea and land, of air and fire ?

When midnight clangs upon the ear
Within some graveyard dark and drear,
When flickering moonbeams hover nigh
Where countless corpses mouldering lie,
Doth not a shudder pierce the bone,
Among the dead to be alone ?

When burning candles sputter free,
A coffin in the wick we see ;
When flying sparks leap from the fire,
'T is for the sick a presage dire ;
And should a dog bay at the moon,
A funeral will be ready soon.

When in our face the full moon streams,
We 'll answer questions in our dreams,
And tell the truth ; indeed, perverse,
All dreams must go by their reverse,
And when, as some are apt to do,
'Fore breakfast told, they must come true.

All numbers odd are lucky, save
When at a feast, or meeting grave,
A company of thirteen folk
Will find the number sad no joke,
For death and sorrow sure attend
Those who against this law offend.

If on the grate the sunbeams play,
The flame will quickly die away ;
A quarrel without any fault
Will swift arise from spilling salt ;
If killed a lady-bug, a storm
Will roar and rage from such a harm.

When ticks the death-watch o'er our head,
Death 's waiting grimly by our bed ;
Should mirrors break, a doleful fate
Must on the careless hand await ;
Whene'er a soul parts with the tide
The casement must be opened wide.

Such fears oppressed the early man,
And those may laugh at him — who can !
He knew nought of the modern sneers
At all that true to sense appears,
That wipe the spirit world away
From out the things we fear to-day.

Has superstition lost all hold ?
Do we ne'er shrink at fears untold ?
Alas ! poor man remains a prey
To petty terrors, e'en to-day ;
For mankind 's pretty much the same,
And human nature 't is to blame.

Henry Phillips, Jr.